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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8615
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 6038
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 2918
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM 0207
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1276
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1455
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0005
RUEPADJ/CJTF-HOA J2X CAMP LEMONIER DJ
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 001079

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON HELEN BERHANE

REF: ASMARA 862

Classified By: AMB. Scott H. DeLisi for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) While unconfirmed, post received reports that Helen Berhane crossed the border illegally to Sudan on December 21. British Charge received notification from London on December 23, indicating that the human rights NGO, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) claimed she departed Eritrea and was now staying in Sudan. CSW further alleged she would seek support and a visa for travel to the UK or the US for medical treatment and possibly seek asylum.

2. (C) As reported reftel, the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) detained Ms. Berhane for nearly three years because of her religious beliefs. A member of the Rema Church, one of the unregistered religious groups in Eritrea, she was well known Christian singer. Rev. Zacharias Abraham(protect) of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church met with Ms. Berhane in November after her release by the GSE. He recounted to PolOff that GSE officials kept Ms. Berhane in solitary confinement in a shipping container for her entire detention. During her detention GSE officials beat her frequently and severely, insisting she renounce her faith. She refused. In October 2006, after she was beaten so badly she could not walk, GSE officials transferred Ms. Berhane to Halibet Hospital in Asmara for medical treatment. Shortly after her transfer, the GSE informed her they would no longer be detaining her, an act interpreted by her family and the international community as her being "released." She continues to be in a wheelchair and receives regular medical attention and physical therapy for her legs.

3.(C) Comment: Post has so far been unable to confirm reports of Ms. Berhane's departure from Eritrea and, although we continue to look into this, we are attempting to do so discreetly to avoid any possible risks to Berhane or her family. Given the high level of international attention to her situation, post believes Ms. Berhane would likely have been under surveillance. It would be surprising to us if she was able to leave Eritrea without the knowledge of Eritrean officials but at the same time we doubt the GSE would willingly allow her to depart. In addition, given that Ms. Berhane's presence abroad could further negatively focus the international community's attention on human rights in Eritrea, anyone found to have assisted her departure would likely face serious government retaliation. Post will

continue our efforts to confirm or deny the report of Ms. Berhane fleeing Eritrea to inquire about the veracity of the claim and update Washington as additional information becomes available. End Comment.

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